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Media Monitor

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# Keeping an Eye on Congress

## Media Coverage of Congressional Ethics

How have the media covered the debate over Congressional ethics? From January 1 through October 31, we monitored 714 news stories and opinion pieces from the *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. We also logged all jokes about Congressional ethics that appeared on late-night television.

### Major findings:

■ **Everybody's Doin' it** - The media ran over 1000 reports of ethics charges against 47 different members of Congress. *Page 3*

■ **Fit to Print?** - Over one in five allegations concerned sexual impropriety. The *Washington Times* printed more sex-related charges than all other outlets combined. *Page 3*

■ **Wright's Wrongs** - Former House Speaker Jim Wright accounted for 44% of all ethics coverage. Overall, Democrats were the targets of four out of five charges. *Page 2*

■ **Judging Congress** - Democrats got better press than Republicans on TV news and in the *Washington Post*. Republicans fared better than Democrats in the *Washington Times*. *Page 4*

■ **The Lineup** - Tony Coelho got the best press and "Buz" Lukens the worst among frequently evaluated individuals. Barney Frank got a higher proportion of good press than Newt Gingrich. *Page 4*

■ **The Joke's On Congress** - Late-night TV comedians averaged nearly two jokes per week on the Congress's ethical foibles. *Page 6*

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## Covering Congress

During the first ten months of 1989 (Jan. 1 to Oct. 31), we analyzed 714 news items on Congressional ethics, including 595 news stories and 119 editorials and signed columns. The coverage peaked during the spring, rising to 162 stories in April and 160 in May, spurred by the investigation of House Speaker Jim Wright. But the monthly total never dropped below 24 stories.

It was preeminently a print story, dominated by the *Washington Post* and its smaller competitor the *Washington Times*, a feisty conservative paper once favored by President Reagan. Despite limiting its publication to weekdays, the *Times* led the coverage with 308 stories (228 news stories and 80 opinion pieces), totalling 6110 column inches of newsprint. The *Times*' coverage included 89 front page stories. The *Post* followed with 225 stories (186 news and 39 opinion), 48 front-page articles among them, totalling 4691 column inches of coverage. Thus, the Washington political community has seen a combined 137 front page stories, 39 editorials and 80 op-ed pieces in its two dailies this year. Their overall coverage is the equivalent of 86 full newspaper pages sans headlines, pictures or advertisements.

Although the newspaper totals dwarf the television coverage, by most standards this has been a big story for the networks as well. The three evening newscasts ran 181 ethics stories with a total airtime of 5 hours 31 minutes. The coverage was almost evenly divided among ABC (62 stories, 107 minutes), CBS (57 stories, 109 minutes) and NBC (62 stories, 115 minutes). But two-thirds of these stories were broadcast in April and May, the peak period of the Wright investigation. After June 30, the networks aired only 14 ethics stories in four months. During the same period the *Post* averaged 16 stories a month, the *Times* 25 a month.

**We seem to have been on an ethical binge that has strained relations between the press and politicians.**

-Ken Bode
ex-NBC
correspondent

## Targets

At least one ethical question was raised about the conduct of 47 different members of Congress - 27 Representatives and 20 Senators.

This relatively even split is deceptive, however, because Senators were mentioned rarely, Congressmen often. No individual Senator's name came up more than six times, while eight Congressmen together accumulated over 700 mentions, nearly 90% of the total for both chambers. The roll call was headed by former House Speaker Jim Wright (D-TX), whose ethical dilemmas were chronicled four times as often as any other member's. Wright's case alone accounted for 44% of all ethics coverage (393 of 889 mentions). Nine separate charges against Wright were mentioned in more than ten stories apiece, including four charges that appeared more than 50 times - accepting improper gifts, violating House rules on outside income, misconduct in private business, and improper lobbying.

### The Accused
#### Mentions

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Wright | 393 |
| 2. | Frank | 95 |
| 3. | Coelho | 75 |
| 4. | Lukens | 69 |
| 5. | Gingrich | 64 |
| 6. | Savage | 32 |
| 7. | Gray | 29 |
| 8. | Bates | 22 |
| | All Others | 110 |

A second tier of ethics coverage was occupied by Barney Frank (D-MA, 95 mentions), former Democratic whip Tony Coelho (D-CA, 75), Donald "Buz" Lukens (R-OH, 69) and Republican whip Newt Gingrich (R-GA, 64). Frank and Lukens were charged with sexual improprieties for their involvement with a homosexual prostitute and a sixteen year old girl, respectively. Coelho resigned after questions were raised about his business dealings in buying junk bonds. Gingrich was accused of breaking House rules to secure contributions toward marketing his book.

The other House members whose alleged misconduct received substantial media attention were Gus Savage (D-IL, 32 mentions) Bill Gray (D-PA, 29), and Jim Bates (D-CA, 22). Savage

and Bates were charged with sexual harassment - Savage for making sexual advances toward a Peace Corps worker in Africa, Bates for harassing a member of his staff. Gray was reported to be under investigation for having a no-show employee on his staff. The report was later denied by the Justice Department.

Television gave little coverage to the cases of alleged sexual misconduct - no stories on either Bates or Savage, 9 on Frank and 14 stories on Lukens. The cameras were attracted more to power than to sexual scandal. The networks ran 117 stories on Wright, over six times as many as they aired on Coelho, who generated the next heaviest TV coverage with 19 stories. Other TV totals were 13 stories on Gingrich and 9 on Gray. Television's 117 Wright stories surpassed even the *Post*'s 113. The leader in the Wright derby, though, was the *Times* with 163 stories. The two newspapers gave roughly similar levels of attention to the others, with the exception of Barney Frank. Frank was featured in 62 stories in the *Times*, almost twice as often as he appeared in all other outlets combined (24 articles in the *Post* and 9 TV stories).

**What you see is simply the result of a fine old tradition of American journalism - careful scrutiny of individual members of Congress.**

-Sara Fritz
*L.A. Times*

## Charges

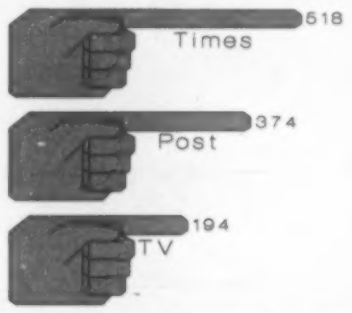
We recorded 1086 charges of unethical conduct during the ten months of the study, more than three per day on average. Most concerned financial misdeeds of some sort. The largest single category however, was sexual impropriety (241 mentions). Sexual acts accounted for over one fifth of all allegations mentioned; they ranged from the Barney Frank male prostitute scandal to less visible allegations such as Rep. Austin Murphy's (D-PA) extramarital relations and Sen. Edward Kennedy's (D-MA) behavior in private dining rooms. The heaviest reporting on financial matters concerned private business misconduct (158 mentions) and the acceptance of gifts (156), both fueled by the Wright case. Violations of outside income rules, improper lobbying of federal officials, conflict of interest cases, and violation of government disclosure rules were the other major financially related charges. All were lodged against numerous Congressmen and Senators. Another frequent topic with a financial component was abuse of the Congressional staff system, i.e. using staffers to perform personal business or otherwise mistreating them.

**We have entered a new era of ethical McCarthyism.**

-Rep. Thomas Downey (D-NY)

### The Charges
Mentions

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Sexual Acts | 241 |
| 2. | Private business | 158 |
| 3. | Accepting gifts | 156 |
| 4. | Outside income | 92 |
| 5. | Staff abuse | 87 |
| 6. | Lobbying | 63 |
| 7. | Conflict of interest | 57 |
| 8. | Evading rules | 50 |
| 9. | Campaign violations | 35 |
| 10. | Disclosure | 28 |



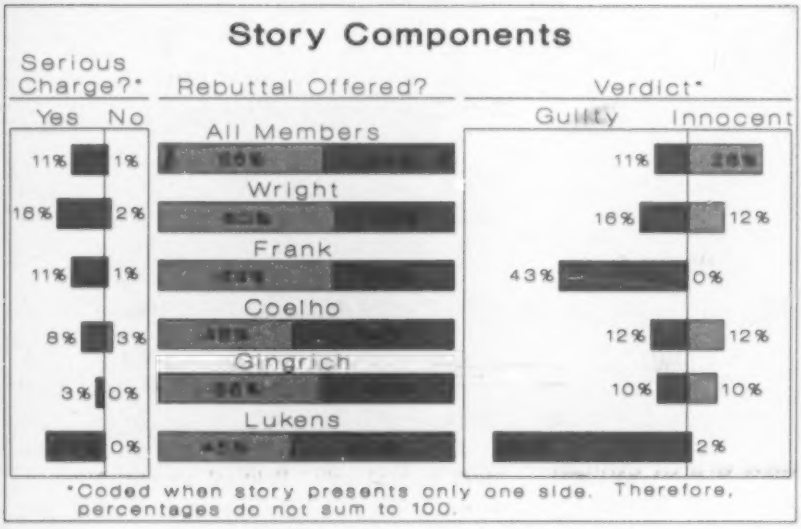

Most of these charges never found a national television audience; only one in six (194) appeared on TV news. The principal audience was the Washington political community. The capital's premier newspaper, which printed 374 charges, was often criticized for pursuing the story so zealously. Political scientist Norman Ornstein charged that "to read the *Post*. . . one could only get the impression that these people . . . are reprobates, bagmen or worse." (*Post*, 5/29). Ironically, it was the city's other newspaper that published by far the most charges of Congressional misconduct. The *Washington Times* led the pack with 518 allegations in all, including more charges of sexual shenanigans and staff abuse than the *Post* and the networks put together.

## What's in a Story?

The archetypal ethics story not only formulates a charge but evaluates its seriousness, offers a response from the accused or his surrogates, and finally provides a verdict. In practice, both the formula and the conclusions are often less than clear-cut. So we noted all stories that came to a clear conclusion, without debate, as to the seriousness of the charge and the guilt or innocence of the accused. We also noted whether the accused was offered a rebuttal. Overall, the seriousness of a given charge was affirmed eleven times as often as it was discounted, though most discussions were balanced or inconclusive. The targeted member of Congress got a chance to rebut the accusations just over half the time (56% of all stories). And the charges were supported over twice as often as they were discounted (25% to 11%), although only one story in three came to a clear verdict.

**The (*Washington*) *Post* is on an all-out moralistic assault against the Congress of the United States.**

-Norman Ornstein
Amer. Enterprise Institute




This formula varied according to the individual case. Lukens fared worst: The seriousness of the charges against him were never disputed, he got to respond less than half the time, and guilty verdicts outweighed those of innocence by an overwhelming 65% to 2%. Frank didn't fare much better, with the seriousness of the charges regularly stressed and 43% guilty verdicts never once balanced by a conclusion that he was innocent. The members accused of financial irregularities fared better than their colleagues charged with improper sexual activities. Wright, Coelho and Gingrich all received roughly balanced coverage on the question of their culpability and all had a reasonable chance to respond. Moreover, the seriousness of the charges against Coelho and Gingrich was not affirmed as regularly as for the other members under investigation.

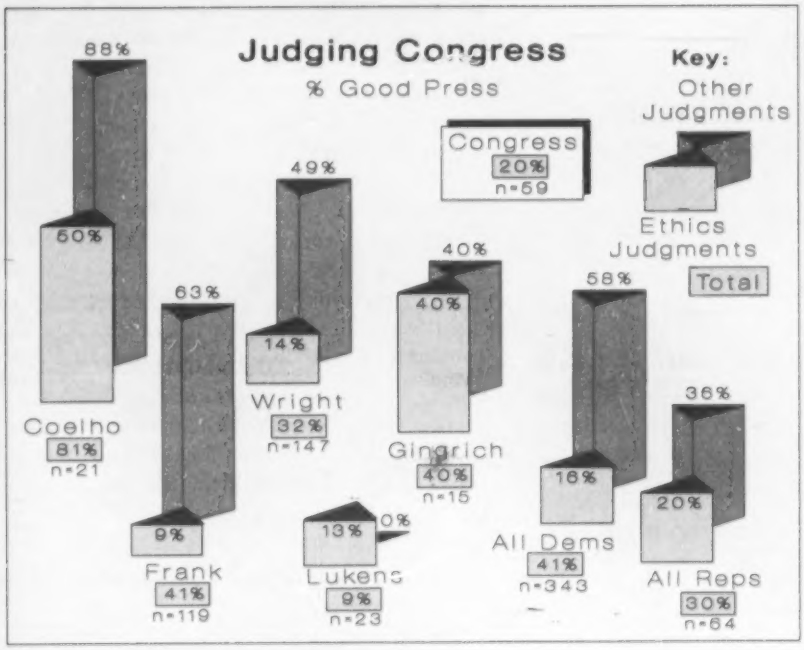
## Passing Judgment

The bottom line of an ethics story is the judgement passed on the accused. We coded all reporter and source evaluations of individuals charged with misconduct. But many evaluations were not directly related to an ethics charge. Often a negative evaluation of a member's ethical behavior was balanced by a positive evaluation of other aspects of his performance. For example, columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak noted the view of unnamed Democrats that, "the (Barney) Frank affair is an embarrassment whose damage is corrosive and probably severe." But they also praised Frank as "smart, witty and hard-working,...a natural leader."

Overall, the judgments on Frank's personal integrity were only 9% positive and 91% negative. But other judgments on Frank in the same stories were 63% positive and 37% negative. Thus, Frank's combined level of good press was a respectable 41% (i.e. 41% positive vs. 59% negative judgments). Jim Wright and Tony Coelho benefitted from similar patterns. Coelho's early exit strategy was rewarded with an overall 81% good press, remarkable for someone who resigned under an ethical cloud. By contrast, neither Lukens nor Gingrich received much favorable commentary apart from their ethics problems. That left Gingrich, as Wright's chief accuser, with a cumulative 40% good press, only slightly better than the 32% received by Wright.—And Lukens finished last among individuals frequently evaluated, with a dismal 9% cumulative good press.

These differences reflected a broader partisan split in good press, with Democrats outstripping Republicans by 40% to 31%. Members of both parties fared poorly when evaluated on ethics

charges. The Democrats' big boost came in non-ethics judgments - 58% positive, compared to only 36% positive for Republicans. Congress




itself fared worse than either party, with four negative judgments for every positive one (20% good press). For example, former President Carter wrote in the *Post* (6/12), "There is little doubt that ethical standards (in Congress) have deteriorated during the past decade."

There were sharp differences among media outlets in evaluating the parties and the institution. Democratic members received twice as much good press as Republicans on TV news (54% to 27%), and three times as much in the *Washington Post* (45% to 15%). Only at the *Washington Times* did Republicans fare better, by 47% positive judgments to 36% for Democrats. Once again, most of these differences came in evaluations not explicitly linked to ethics charges. Thus, in rating Senators and Representatives apart from their ethical problems, the *Post* gave over five times as much good press to Democrats as Republicans (72% vs. 13%). In fact, the *Post* was unique in giving Republicans even worse press on non-ethics matters than on ethical dimensions (13% vs. 18% positive judgments). The *Post* also gave the highest marks overall to Congress - 33% positive, compared to 16% on TV news and only 8% in the *Times*.

**All of us are trying unsuccessfully to avoid the appearance of a feeding frenzy.**

-Jim Wooten
ABC

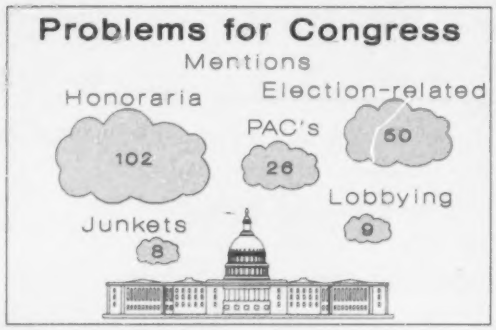
## Causes and Effects

The ethics story isn't only about the behavior of individual members of Congress. It also concerns the institution they serve. Much of the news focused on the causes of the current ethics controversy, the institution-wide problems that were causing troubles for many members, and the likely outcome of this period of uncertainty and strife. Once again, the answers to these questions depended partly on the news organization raising them.

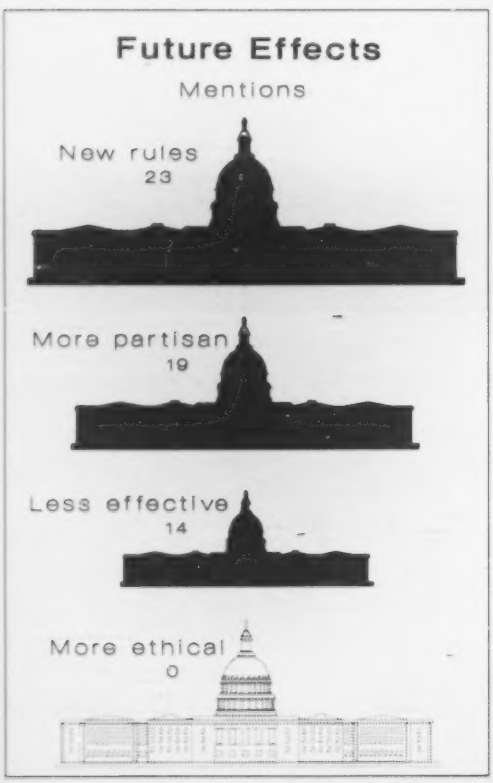
Overall, the controversy was traced most often to three factors - (1) revenge (mentioned 31 times), or the self-perpetuating vendetta atmosphere in which members of the two parties attacked each other to avenge previous losses, e.g. angry Wright supporters turning on Gingrich; (2) the corrupting effects of one-party rule, in this case the Democrats' long-term control of the Senate and, especially, the House (22 mentions); and (3) the general public's changing standards of ethical behavior (20 mentions). But the various news organizations differed sharply as to which of these was most important. The *Post* attributed the controversy

most often to changing standards, accounting for half of all references to that factor. The *Times* laid it at the Democrats' door, with a

majority of all references to one-party rule. And television focused most often on revenge, a reflection of the networks' case-by-case approach to the story. Other factors that came up less frequently included increased media attention (13 mentions), inadequate Congressional ethics rules (12), the Reagan administration's effect on Washington's ethical climate (4) and the corrupting influence of low pay for members of Congress (3).




There was far more agreement across outlets as to what the major problems are. Honoraria for speeches, often paid by special interest groups, headed the list at all outlets. The honoraria problem was cited over twice as often as any other (102 mentions). Next in line were PACs (political action committees) and other issues related to electoral fund-raising. Hardy perennials like junkets and lobbying by former members of Congress (the "revolving door") were far down the list.




**The first thing a new member (of Congress) learns is how to rise above ethics.**

-Wesley Pruden
*Washington Times*

The ultimate effects of the current controversy were broached most often in the *Post*. Mentioned most frequently (23 times overall, 18 in the *Post*) was the likelihood of rule changes clarifying standards for ethical conduct. Close behind (19 mentions) was the less sanguine prospect of greater partisanship or a less collegial institutional atmosphere. Another frequently heard forecast (14 mentions) was the probability that legislative effectiveness will be undermined by the ethics controversy or its outcomes. We looked for, but could not find, any source who argued that one outcome might actually be more ethical behavior by members of Congress.

## Ethics Jokes

Congress' ethics problems have provided fertile ground for the monologues of TV's late-night talk show hosts. During the study period we logged 74 jokes on Congressional ethics by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. During the spring the genre was fueled by Jim Wright's problems ("Most people don't realize what a gifted man he is. That's the problem, most of the gifts haven't been reported." Leno, 4/17) Since then the sexual escapades of Buz Lukens and Barney Frank have picked up the slack: "They're accusing one Congressman of having an affair with a teenaged girl, another of being homosexual. Is Gary Hart starting to look better to you?" (Carson, 6/7) "You've got to say one thing about Barney Frank. It's nice to see one Congressman who isn't out there chasing 16 year old girls." (Leno, 9/20) "Congress says that it should give itself a 35% pay increase...under the current salary schedule, a Congressman really has to struggle to support himself and a chauffeur/lover." (Letterman, 9/20)

Frequently, however, the probity of Congress itself was treated as a bitter joke. This was a specialty of Jay Leno: "We'd save a lot of time if from now on all Congressmen's campaign photos included front and side views." (5/31) "Foley should change his title to speaker of the halfway house." (6/12) "The only house you can afford to buy anymore is the House of Representatives." (6/12) "There are three stages to being a Congressman. When they're first elected and unknown, you see them on the local news. Then when they get popular you see them on the network news. Then when they really get big - 'America's Most Wanted'!" (6/1)